

## **“Programme Notes” Episode 2. Music and Night**

### ***Introduction***

*Kia ora,*

*You're listening to “Programme Notes”, a podcast about classical music.*

*Each episode relates to the Chamber Music New Zealand tour, pulling on some tantalising thread the concert programme offers, but what unravels stands alone too.*

*From the central figures and ideas—the John Dowlands, the “[Toccatina and Fugue]”s—to the universe of esoteric marginalia, this series is for the curious music lover.*

*I'm your host, Clarissa Dunn*

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### **Beethoven, Moonlight Sonata.**

Have you ever found yourself captivated by the sight and the light of the moon?

As darkness descends and the distractions of day fall away, the mind is free to wander. It's a contemplative time.

In the nineteenth century, long before man had set foot on the moon, artists considered the moon a thing of great romantic beauty to be admired from afar. And moonlight elicited feelings of contemplation, introspection, and yearning for the infinite.

Caspar Friedrich's famous 1822 painting, *Moonrise over the sea*, captures this beautifully, with three people seated on rocks at the seashore, staring out to the horizon, contemplating life while the moon rises above lilac clouds.

This painting emphasises the enormity and mysteriousness of the moon. But this kind of artistic response wasn't merely representative. In the nineteenth century, the moon and moonlight were felt to foster romantic bodily and emotional attitudes.

[PLAY BEETHOVEN, MOONLIGHT SONATA]

Recognise this behind me? Yes, it's Beethoven's famous "Moonlight" sonata, created twenty years before Friedrich's painting. Although Beethoven wasn't responsible for the title, it's easy to hear how the name has stuck. The music really does feel like a moonlit musing:

Do you hear the repeating, three-note figure—a simple arpeggiation of a harmony? In the nineteenth century, this kind of repetitive chordal figuration was a common technique for improvising. You hear it a lot in improvisatory pieces like preludes, where the same motif takes you through all sorts of different harmonies, and leads you to unexpected destinations. This improvisatory quality is no doubt one of the reasons Beethoven's piece was nicknamed "Moonlight"—as a symbol of contemplation and introspection. Let's hear it again:

[PLAY OPENING AGAIN]

Do those repetitive arpeggiated figurations in the middle of the texture allow you to cling to a divine moment in the ever-changing rhythm of nature? In this case, those figurations might freeze-frame a naturally moving landscape—perhaps the gently murmuring sea by moonlight. Music is the perfect medium for conveying the animated stillness of nature. While the rhythms of music change gently through time, harmonic or motivic repetition provides ways of snapshotting it—of clinging to a timeless moment.

Those repetitive figurations depict the contemplative nature of the moon in other pieces too. Here's the opening of Schubert's song, "An den Mond" ("To the Moon"), with a very similar setup to the Moonlight sonata—a deep bass line with repetitive inner, arpeggiated chords:

[PLAY BEGINNING OF SCHUBERT, "AN DEN MOND"]

Let's go back to Beethoven's piece now, and listen to the famous bell-like tones that announce the bright melody over the top of that figuration. Perhaps these ringing bells represent the intense rays of moonlight shimmering over the sea below, as in Friedrich's painting.

[PLAY BEETHOVEN AGAIN, NOW GOING ON INTO THE MELODY]

This textural setup—a deep bass line, a repetitive and static texture of arpeggiated chords, and a bright melody on top—wound up being the go-to formula of the Romantic nocturne for solo piano. So in essence, Beethoven's Moonlight actually sounds like a nocturne.

Beethoven's use of these bell-like tones isn't an accident. In the nineteenth century, bells were intimately connected to moonlight. Both bells and moonlight were seen to typify the romantic's yearning for something distant and infinite. The philosophers and artists of Beethoven's day understood bell-

like sounds as boundless and timeless—qualities they also identified in the moon's rays.

Nineteenth-century philosopher, Jean Paul, described romanticism as “beauty without bounds—the beautiful infinite”. For Jean Paul, both the moon's rays and the disappearing sound of a bell vanish beautifully into the distance. And vanishing and distance were crucial features of romantic yearning. The border between a bell sound, and the silence that follows, was thought to be beautifully indistinct. This blurring of the boundaries between sound and silence fosters sonic resonance. Sound extends into the infinite, just as the moon's rays seem to have no distinct boundaries. Both bells and moonlight blur our boundaries of time and space. They feel timeless and eternal.

Another feature of bells important to nineteenth-century artists was the cyclicity created through striking a series of bells in a similar fashion. This was felt to induce hypnotic melancholy. Compare the repeating bells in Beethoven's Moonlight sonata to this poem by Edgar Allan Poe:

to the rolling of the bells,  
of the bells, bells, bells:  
to the tolling of the bells,  
of the bells, bells, bells, bells,  
bells, bells, bells –  
to the moaning and groaning of the bells.

The cyclicity can make you feel that even after the piece has ended, bells continue to toll somewhere in the distance. The bell's decay is like the shimmer of moonlight: it blurs the boundary between the real and the spiritual. Past, present, and future dissolve into one moment.

## **Chopin, Nocturne Op. 27/1**

Night-time offered the romantics a portal into the mysterious, the unheard, the unseen, the untouched. The fascination with what lay “in between” was thoroughly romantic, and permeated all of the arts.

In music, one important gateway to the unknown was through the dreamy “nocturne for solo piano”. I've spoken about it being a lyrical piece, with a simple, undulating accompaniment. Now let's listen to the type of vocal melody that so inspired Frederick Chopin, the master of the romantic nocturne.

[PLAY BELLINI, CAST DIVA, FROM SINGER'S ENTRANCE]

To sing that Bellini aria, a singer sustains the melody through their breath and bodily support, just as wind players do. But you can't use breath to sustain a melody on the piano. And nor do pianists use the continuous action provided

by a stringed bow. This means that playing the piano, and listening to the piano, involves a lot of imagined sound. We fill in the gaps. We listen, sustain single notes in our mind, and we might even imagine expressive slides between notes—just like a string player or singer would make.

Now listen to Chopin's haunting Nocturne in C-sharp minor, the first of his Op. 27, and think about how much inner sound your imagination is providing to make this melody sing. And consider how your imagined sounds bring you closer to the exploratory, mysterious realm of the night.

[PLAY CHOPIN, NOCTURNE OP 27 NO 1]

And there's a similarity to Beethoven's "Moonlight" sonata. It's also in the same haunting key of C-sharp minor, and it involves a similarly repeating arpeggiated figure with a bright melody over top. It's the Moonlight musical formula! In this case, though, the melody is less like discrete bells, and more like a series of points along a melodic path that we need to actively connect with our own sonic imaginings.

## **Wieck-Schumann's Nocturne Op. 6 No. 2**

Let's listen to another nocturne now—one by Clara Wieck-Schumann.

Her nocturne, Op. 6, No. 2, with its wandering, twisting lines, provides even more opportunity for internal, imagined sound.

[PLAY WIECK-SCHUMANN, NOCTURNE]

A few times in this nocturne she pre-empts upward-leaps with small decorative figures—figures that build momentum before the jump. These figures go up a note, back down again, down a note, and back up again—providing momentum for the large leaps upward. It's a really expressive compositional technique, and thoroughly romantic—mimicking the movements you might make on a springboard preparing for a dive: we jump slightly up, back down, go slightly below the starting point, and back to the starting point, before jumping high into the air.

## **Charles Ives, Central Park in the Dark**

To capture a vivid sense of night, one thing composers do a lot is to allow nocturnal happenings to appear out of an otherwise hazy, eerie soundscape. American composer, Charles Ives, does this in his 1906 piece, *Central Park in the Dark*. Ives creates musical layers by pitting different musical groups against each other. The hushed strings provide the backdrop of relative darkness in Central Park. And over the top of that, as we imagine ourselves sitting in the park, we hear other groups enter and retreat from the soundscape. In the following passage you'll hear pianolas in battle, traffic

noise, and a street band. The night-time activities of New York City are recreated by the chamber orchestra as literally as possible:

[PLAY IVES, CENTRAL PARK IN THE DARK EXCERPT]

### **Béla Bartók, “The Night's Music”**

Another master of this nocturnal soundscape technique is the Hungarian composer, Béla Bartók, who tends to highlight fine, luminous, and often sensuous nocturnal details. But Bartók especially loved being in nature—breathing forest air and hearing the sounds of the wild. In his “The Night's Music”, from his solo piano pieces *Out of Doors*, Bartók depicts the murmurings, vibrations and animal sounds, as well as human movements, punctuating the otherwise still dark night. This technique came to be known as Bartók's “night music style.”

[PLAY BARTÓK, “THE NIGHT'S MUSIC”]

As in so many of his “night music” pieces, Bartok sets up an eerie, hushed landscape, out of which we can hear nocturnal happenings more distinctly. Quiet, dissonant chords open the piece, suggesting a gentle breeze and a sense of anticipation. Out of this backdrop, Bartók summons the chirping and croaking of crickets, cicadas, and frogs.

Later in the piece, Bartók suggests human activity through the use of a folk-like melody. The very widely spaced octaves creates the sense of an ominous presence.

[PLAY MIDDLE SECTION]

“The Night's Music”, performed by Jian Liu

### **Murray Schafer, Clarinet Nocturne from Patria**

Continuing with the theme of nature and the outdoors at night-time, let's hear a nocturne for clarinet by Canadian composer Murray Schafer. This nocturne comes from his music-theatre project, *Patria* (Latin for “homeland”). *Patria* involves 12 major episodes that follow a rather elaborate plot. An undertaking of mammoth proportions, Schafer has been working on this for over 40 years!

The performance settings for *Patria* are all highly original. While some of the settings are indoors, many of the episodes are staged outdoors in nature. You can hear how Schafer delights in natural soundscapes, as he explores the relationships and interactions between composed musical sounds and the sounds and forces of nature.

[PLAY SCHAFFER, CLARINET NOCTURNE]

The “nocturnes” in Schafer's *Patria* are designed for outdoor, night-time performance. The audience and participants are asked to be silent, as music becomes one with the night. You'll hear a clarinet across a lake. We hear the sounds of crickets, birds, and frogs, the sensuous sounds of the water, and the echoes and resonance of the clarinet as it plays with, incites, and responds to the life and sounds of nature.

There is something ritualistic about this musical experience. Not only is the participants' annual return to perform this work every August a ritual in itself. The music also sounds ritualistic, and this is largely connected to the themes we have been exploring in this podcast. Listen to how the clarinet sounds connected to its natural setting. We are made more aware of how music “moves”, “floats”, “dances”, lives its life.

While the musical concepts of “line” and “shape” are largely metaphorical, there is some grounding to those terms too. Here, in the outdoors, that grounding becomes audible: you can hear sound rebound off surfaces and interact with its surroundings. And this is made possible through stillness, bringing nocturnal wonders—and musical wonders—to life.

### **Chopin, Berceuse (Lullaby)**

While Bartók's and Schafer's approaches are to highlight sonic difference, the very opposite approach is also used to depict night-time. Night-time is sometimes thought of as a blanket—a comforting blanket of darkness, silence, and stillness—allowing us to imagine night as a safe, contained space.

In musical terms, this means that, if the parameters allow, we might experience a night piece as an “ocean of sound.” Rather than try to engage actively with the music, we might instead let it wash over us, focusing on how the sound feels on and around our body. While we're luxuriating in a sonic space, we can be deliciously fooled into thinking that sound is effortless—that musicians are magicians and simply make sound happen.

These so-called “contained” musical spaces can be suggested when there is minimal change in musical surface features: when there is little dynamic or rhythmic disruption, and when there's a lot of textural similarity.

We commonly use the metaphor of contained spaces to understand complex things in everyday life. For example, we use our understanding of what it feels like to be in contained spaces in order to better conceptualize our emotional being. Think about how you describe your various moods: you might say “I am *in* a good *place* right now.” Or “I fell *into* a dark *pit* of despair.” Or we might tell someone to “snap *out* of it!”

Now, let me invite you into the contained sonic and emotional space that is Chopin's Berceuse ("Lullaby"). As you listen to the opening, imagine you're a baby in a safe, night-time space. And let the blanket of music wrap itself around you.

[PLAY CHOPIN, BERCEUSE]

So what enables us to hear this lullaby as a blanket of sound? Partly, it's the music; but it's also Jian Liu's performance. Compositionally, the piece repeats the tonic or home note on all the downbeats, suggesting sonic homogeneity. The very similar, repetitive rhythms in the melody line also create a sense of sameness—a safe, stable environment.

As for the performance, Jian's regular dynamic level and evenness encourage us to soak in the sonic landscape, rather than focus on details. He very gently plays all of the tonic or home notes, creating a sense that these notes are a continuous, fluid substance. And the untroubled melody seems to float on top. This all allows us to luxuriate in the middle of that sonic ocean, forgetting our self and our own body. We simply bathe in the calming sound of the familiar—just like a baby listening to a lullaby in the safety of their parent's arms.

### **Robert Schumann, "Zwielicht"**

Of course, night-time isn't all stillness and calmness. Many romantic imaginations embraced night as a sinister time. Just as filmmakers and visual artists love to reveal the creepy or disturbing aspects of night-time, so too do composers.

In Robert Schumann's eerie song "Zwielicht" ("Twilight"), he depicts that time of day as a mysterious, deceptive moment. Although written in 1840, its chromaticism, and only very vague indication of the tonic or home note, makes it sound like it was created many years later. Listen to the serpentine twisting and turning, and the strange upward leap near the beginning of the singer's line. The unpredictable and spine-chilling soundscape removes any sense of stability. We are made to feel ill at ease! As Eichendorff, the poet writes, "Much can go lost in the night—Be wary, watchful, on your guard!"

[PLAY SCHUMANN, "ZWIELICHT"]

### **Robert Schumann, "In der Nacht"**

If you suffer from nightmares, you might relate to Schumann's "In der Nacht" ("In the Night") from *Fantasiestücke*, his Op. 12 Fantasy pieces. The turbulent melodic surges create a nightscape of dizzying, swirling figures. Listen to how these melodic shapes emerge out of the accompanying texture before dissipating again into nothingness. Being surrounded by darkness and not

knowing when, or from what direction, dangers will arise, creates a feverish, anxious feeling.

[PLAY SCHUMANN, "IN DER NACHT"]

## **Gillian Whitehead, Lullaby for Matthew**

To wrap up our exploration of nocturnal music, I'm going to play you a piece that takes us through the entire night cycle. New Zealand composer Gillian Whitehead's Lullaby for Matthew seems to evoke the calm sleep of a baby, the baby's eventual fitful and restless dreams, and the return of calm slumber when morning approaches.

Listen to Gillian's sensitive treatment of resonance and colour under Jian's fingers. Her spacing of chords, often with a wide span between top and bottom, creates a luminosity reminiscent of moonlight. And the continuous variation and development, with its improvisatory feel, once again places us in a state of nocturnal contemplation.

[PLAY WHITEHEAD, LULLABY FOR MATTHEW, IN ITS ENTIRETY]

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## **Outroduction**

*"Programme Notes" is produced by Elliot Vaughan for Chamber Music New Zealand.*

*This episode was written by Hamish Robb.*

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